

John Dawson and Katherine Wegman, University of Rochester  
Transcending Informality: Building a Community Center in Egoli Informal Settlement  
June-July 2014 (Cape Town, South Africa)

**Background**

While studying with the Institute for the International Education of Students (IES) Abroad in Cape Town in 2012, we each volunteered in the informal settlement of Egoli, a squatter community relegated to Cape Town's outskirts during the apartheid era. During our time there, we observed that the government's failure to officially recognize the community not only resulted in Egoli residents facing the constant threat of eviction, but also prevented them from obtaining infrastructure necessary for community development. For example, the community of 2,000 has a single water spigot, no electricity, and no municipal waste management services.

Among the community's current needs, its community center is barely large enough to hold 30 people, though the space simultaneously serves as the community center, church, library, and childcare center. Furthermore, the community center serves as a hub between Egoli and formal institutions, including local churches, University of Cape Town students, and IES volunteers. It is the conduit through which resources enter the community and is severely inadequate; its dilapidated condition and insufficient space prevent larger community gatherings as well as the maximization of incoming resources, such as health workshops facilitated by IES students. We each left Egoli impassioned to return to the community and foster peace by empowering the people to rise above the structural violence and racial discrimination that precipitated and propagate their informalized status.

**Project Description**

In partnership with Ikhayalami, a Cape Town non-profit founded to develop and implement solutions for informal settlement upgrading, our project seeks to address the structural violence afflicting Egoli in a three-fold manner. First, we will construct a new community center for the people of Egoli. Next, we will assist community leaders in drafting a strategic plan, situating Egoli in an existing network of other Cape Town informal settlements whose community-driven projects are supported with Ikhayalami resources. Finally, by linking Egoli to this pre-existing network, community development project ideas will be explored by residents working with specialized and experienced teams from Ikhayalami.

By providing the necessary infrastructure, our project will enable the people of Egoli to assemble regularly for organizational meetings, recreational activities, and children's play – gatherings that will promote community engagement, stability, and agency for a place that has always been "informal" and unrecognized. Ikhayalami will provide us with a construction team to assist in incorporating community ideas into the design and construction of the facility.

Abe and Anna Fransman, Egoli community leaders, will draft their strategic plan under the guidance of David Stephens, an IES Health and Community Development professor and liaison between IES and the Egoli community. A strategic plan will empower the people of Egoli to chart their own course for development, returning to them the agency and formality that the government has yet to recognize. This plan will guide Egoli's incoming resources, including IES volunteer projects, so to maximize their positive impact. Assessment of long-term project outcomes will be conducted by non-profit organizations in the informal settlement network. Evaluation will consist of tracking usage of the new community center and community members' utilization of development workshops, as well as assessing achievement of goals in the community's strategic plan.

By providing community members with development and educational resources with the potential for future income generation, we will be providing the tools and skills necessary for the people of Egoli to transcend the structural violence that has propagated their marginalization as a South African community.

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**Project Timeline**

We plan to complete our project June 1 – July 31, 2014. The first two weeks will be spent meeting with community leaders and the Ikhayalami construction team to design and purchase construction materials for the community center. Construction of the community center, which will utilize the support of community members, the Ikhayalami construction team, and IES volunteers, will begin on June 15, and will be completed by Nelson Mandela Day on July 18, 2014. Community development workshops and introductions to the informal settlement-Ikhayalami network will be held from July 19 – July 30. Our project will culminate in a braai (South African barbeque) for Egoli community members, to be held on July 31, 2014.

**Prospect for Sustainable Peace**

Our project lays the foundation for sustainable peace in Egoli by providing infrastructure that will foster community stability and collaboration, strengthening community agency and ability to assess community needs and resources, and connecting Egoli to a support network of other urban poor communities and Cape Town non-profit organizations dedicated to informal settlement upgrading.

The construction of a new community center in Egoli will provide a physical forum for community gatherings and meetings, bolstering the internal resilience of Egoli community members. The strategic plan will return to Egoli its voice in charting its own course for development. Linking Egoli to a broader network of informal settlements and non-profit organizations will strengthen the voice of the community in negotiating with the government for improved infrastructure and municipal utilities. By helping to address unequal power dynamics and fostering a sense of community, our project empowers the people of Egoli to transcend the structural violence the community experiences.

In addition to local partnerships, our project shows potential for long-term, sustainable impact because of Egoli's relationship with IES Abroad, which has sent volunteer study abroad students to the community for the past five years. Egoli's strategic plan will be used to guide future IES student volunteer projects, thereby maximizing the contributions of study abroad students and enhancing their educational experience. Further ensuring the sustainability of project gains is the establishment of a relationship between Egoli and an existing network of informal settlements and non-profits. This three-way collaboration between Egoli, IES, and Ikhayalami partners shows great promise for enabling the community to transcend structural violence and informality long after we have left Cape Town.

**About Us**

Since returning from Cape Town, we have undertaken coursework related to conflict in post-apartheid South Africa and the anthropology of development, and have forged a connection with Andrea Bolnick, founder of Ikhayalami. We are passionate about our project and are raising funds to cover personal costs and supplement the project budget.

John's interest in public health inspired him to work as a community health research assistant this past summer, where he honed his skills in coordinating teams and communicating with people from diverse backgrounds.

Katherine is an anthropology major who has studied public health during a semester abroad in London, England and Kingston, Jamaica. Her international experience and coursework have helped develop her ability to design culturally sensitive approaches to problems.